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ABSTRACT

Unless educators engage in thorough planning, in making the most efficient use of economic resources, and in interpreting to the public why education deserves high priority, public education is in for a long period of gradual decline. The central thrust of the current administrative era is the management of decline, or decremental planning. The author briefly describes the impact of declining enrollment and financial shortages on New York schools. He also discusses the descent of education in the ladder of public priorities and the pressure for accountability, including the importance currently attached to minimum competencies and state testing for minimum academic standards. (Author/DS)

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MAINTAINING EXCELLENCE

IN THE MANAGEMENT OF DECLINE

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NOTE: The attached remarks were made on October 11, 1976 in Niagara Falls, New York at the Fifth Annual Conference of the School Administrators Association of New York State. The conference theme was, "Declining Resources--Strategies for Survival."

EA 009 950

MAINTAINING EXCELLENCE

IN THE MANAGEMENT OF DECLINE

Mrs. Auer, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Robert Lancto, in his letter of invitation, suggested that I talk about how we can achieve educational excellence in a period that will be characterized by decline of various kinds--declining enrollments (baby bust, birth dearth), dwindling financial resources, and plummeting public confidence in our school systems. His request for me to describe what the future will be like reminds me of a story told about Frank Plaisted, who was an executive of the Union Pacific in the heyday of that railroad. Plaisted was told one time that a daughter had just been born to one of his associates with a thin, diaphanous membrane over her eyes known as a "caul" and that a child who so arrived in the world had the gifts of prescience, of prevision, and of foresight. Plaisted promptly replied that he must have come equipped with a caul at the other end of his anatomy since, he lamented, his hindsight was so much better than his foresight.

I will do as Mr. Lancto asks, keeping in mind, however, that the best thing about the future is that it comes only one day at a time.

In this connection it is now quite possible that education is in the first stage of a long twilight, an evening twilight, not a morning twilight, which, together with the familiar doubts about whether educators have promised too much and delivered too little, and the substantial loss of public

confidence in our educational institutions and those who work in them and run them, will consist of markedly reduced financial support, fewer students, lessened quality, and curtailed educational opportunity. So there is a clear and present danger that unless all of us in education work hard for our mutual cause, unless we interpret in many wise ways to the public what it is we are doing and why it deserves a high priority, unless we plan ahead and help others to do so, unless we make the most efficient and economical use of the resources we have, unless we lead instead of simply following out front, we are in for a long period of gradual decline. Indeed, we are in an administrative era, the central thrust of which is the management of decline, or decremental planning, requiring quite different skills from those needed in the past.

Many of you are aware, of course, that I have spoken about the management of decline to various audiences on previous occasions. It's gotten to the point, in fact, that someone on my staff recently said he was beginning to feel like the father whose son kept practicing the same violin solo at home over and over again. The music was difficult, the son was slaughtering it, and finally the family pooch, Bosco, was howling dolefully and dismally. The father endured it as long as he could and eventually entreated the boy: "For God's sake, now play something Bosco doesn't know."

One thing we all know, or should know, is that most school districts in New York State will have fewer pupils during the next decade. This is

principally the result of declining birth rates combined with the fact that growing numbers of people are moving away to the so-called unbelt region of the country stretching from Florida to California. As someone observed in this regard, America is fast becoming heliocentric.

This downturn has been described in detail in a State Education Department publication entitled "Enrollment Trends: Programs for the Future," which was distributed to school districts throughout New York a couple of months ago. I assume you are familiar with it. But I want to highlight just a couple of significant statistics that should guide planning for the future.

There were 3,489,000 pupils enrolled in the public elementary and secondary schools in this State in 1970-71. It is expected that there will be approximately 2,845,000 by 1982-83. This means a decline of more than 600,000 pupils in a little more than one decade.

However, all districts will not be in similar situations. Some will continue to experience growth. Enrollments in other districts will bottom out and then edge up again. In still other cases, there is little prospect of any upturn for the foreseeable future.

So there is no single strategy for everyone to follow. Rather, every school system must manage events in accord with circumstances particular to its enrollment pattern. There are, however, some general guidelines that ought to apply wherever contraction occurs. Let me mention four that are stressed in the Department brochure:

1. As it becomes necessary to close schools because of declining enrollments, schools with smaller numbers of pupils should be merged with larger ones.

2. Parents of children in schools recommended for closing should be assured that an equivalent or better education will exist in the new school setting.

3. The superintendent's staff should investigate alternative organizational patterns under which future building utilization will clearly serve the needs of all students at all levels. Such an investigation should include recommendations from professional and lay groups in the community.

4. No school should be closed until another use beneficial to the community has been devised.

Managing decline is not easy under any circumstances. But it becomes particularly painful when there is simultaneous slippage in enrollments and financial resources, which is what is happening today.

New York long enjoyed economic preeminence among the different states. But its vigor is now flagging, as shown by various measures of fiscal fitness. As manufacturing firms have moved elsewhere, unemployment rates have hovered above the national average, while the real personal income of New Yorkers (income adjusted for inflation) has risen much more slowly than in the nation as a whole. Moreover, this State has a growing number of families with incomes below the official poverty level. There was a 6.6 percent increase in such families between 1970 and 1974, compared

with a 2.3 decrease across the country. Data of this sort recently led one economic analyst to conclude:

"As improbable as it may seem, New York, one of the country's industrial giants, is moving toward a population mix like that of Arkansas or Georgia 40 years ago."

Such findings hardly bode well for the financing of our school systems, since the tax base will continue to be eroded at the same time that more money will be required to pay for such other social services as welfare and unemployment benefits, to name just two. In this kind of a squeeze, much of the public and many political authorities will look for ways to cut costs in other areas, and education will become an increasingly conspicuous target.

I have made an objective, dispassionate speech to the school superintendents of this State last week answering these charges in plain language. Copies of that speech will be available on request. Now to go on.

A lot of people may think school costs will either level out or drop sharply because there are fewer young people to educate. But this won't happen for many reasons, at least not right away.

Let me elaborate on this important point.

Costs simply cannot be cut in proportion to enrollment declines all that easily, except at the risk of doing a lot of harm to a lot of kids. With time, of course, it will cost less to educate smaller numbers of pupils than larger numbers of pupils. In the short run, however, especially as the

State aid formula is now constructed, the enrollment declines cause very serious financial problems of adjustment in local school districts. The districts, as you well know, find it very difficult to reduce staff size when there is only a small enrollment decline. It is not until sufficient decline occurs to justify position elimination that significant cost reductions can be effected. In addition, although a district with a large loss of pupils may have to reduce its teaching staff, it must do so on the basis of seniority, which means the positions eliminated tend to be those in the lower salary range, while those positions in the higher brackets remain. In other words, reductions in salary costs do not fully reflect the percent by which the staff may have been reduced. Moreover, in the smaller districts, of which there are many, enrollment declines are nowhere near steep enough to allow the elimination of whole classes, let alone whole schools.

Also, inflation keeps pushing up costs. A district is hardly coming out ahead financially when, for example, its enrollment drops by 50 or so pupils in the entire system and inflation goes up six or so percent a year.

Inflation is, indeed, the root cause of many of our problems. State aid does not keep up with cost increases caused by it. Therefore, the local share of the total budget rises more and more rapidly and property owners, who are in a bind financially, too, take out their anger by voting down more school budgets with each passing year. Just in case you are not aware of the final count, a record number of budgets were turned down again in 1976--192 out of 661, for a rejection rate of 29 percent. And, according to our latest

count, 23 districts are operating on straight contingency budgets this year, compared with 7 at the same time in 1975. This is the highest number ever to my knowledge.

And, of course, the energy crisis takes its toll. According to a recent Federal Energy Administration (FEA) survey, energy costs for the nation's public schools rose more than 48 percent in the two years between 1972 and 1974 and skyrocketed again last year. During those two years, schools spent $514 million extra for energy--more than the total yearly cost for textbooks. And in the next few years, it will only get worse.

You should also be aware that State aid as a proportion of spending for public elementary and secondary education is expected to dip to 39 percent in 1976-77, or $3.1 billion out of a total estimated expenditure of $8 billion plus. This will be close to the lowest proportion in the past two decades, and this despite increased legislative mandates in regard to planning, education of the handicapped, and so forth.

While I am on this point, I want to emphasize the continuing commitment on the part of the Board of Regents and myself to achieve greater fiscal equalization, reduction of the wide expenditure and tax disparities among districts, recognition of major special educational needs, and more equitable cost-sharing between the State and local districts. We recognize, of course, that it will not be easy to attain these objectives when the State itself is experiencing severe financial constraints. But a higher priority is a must

if disastrous program cutbacks are to be prevented. The Department is therefore giving special attention to all aspects of State aid through an extensive and intensive study supported by a generous grant of Federal funds. A detailed plan of action will be submitted to the Regents this month for their consideration.

What I have said so far is interwoven with a third form of decline.

Education is declining, not rising, in the ladder of public priorities. It is severely depressed in the national hierarchy of values and occupies a much lower rung in the ladder of priorities than it did in the last two decades. And there is a wave of antischool feeling across the land that is almost unbelievable in a nation that labored so long to expand educational opportunities for the greatest possible number of people from all walks of life, going back to the time of the Founding Fathers. National leaders like Thomas Jefferson believed, as Jefferson put it, that "if the condition of man is to be progressively ameliorated, as we fondly hope and believe, education is to be the chief instrument in effecting it."

I remind you, too, of the powerful plea of Horace Mann for State-supported schooling from one end of the country to the other, out of the conviction that nothing short of this was worthy of us as a people. Said Mann (get set for some startling words):

> As individuals, or as an organized community, we have no natural right, we can derive no authority or countenance from reason, we can cite no attribute or purpose of the divine nature, for giving birth to any human being, and then inflicting upon that being the curse of ignorance, of poverty, and of vice, with all

> their attendant calamities. We are brought, then, to this startling but inevitable alternative -- the natural life of an infant should be extinguished as soon as it is born, or the means should be provided to save that life from being a curse to its possessor; and, therefore, every State is morally bound to enact a code of laws legalizing and enforcing infanticide or a code of laws establishing free schools.

Such rhetoric may be a bit too rich for today's tastes. But what do we so often hear in its place? As I said earlier, seemingly endless denigration of education, particularly by political authorities who are making political hay by saying that education costs too much, that the schools are failing, and that too many students are in college when there aren't enough jobs to go around.

This kind of criticism, by the way, comes from both sides of the political spectrum. As a case in point, Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote an article in a publication called The Public Interest a few years ago in which he opposed "a general increase in educational expenditure" on the ground that "we may already be spending too much." According to Moynihan:

> A school without a roof, or without books, or without teachers would probably not be a school in which much learning went on. But once expenditure rises above a certain zone, money doesn't seem to matter that much in terms of what happens to students.

Today, of course, New Yorkers are being given a choice between Moynihan, the Democratic-Liberal nominee, and James Buckley, the Conservative-Republican incumbent, in the election for the U.S. Senate. In view of Buckley's votes against appropriations for Federal aid to education, not to mention the entire budget of the Department of Health, Education,

and Welfare, I can't help but wonder what he and Moynihan will have to argue about if school spending comes up in one of their campaign debates.

Since this is an election year, by the way, I have been telling various audiences how to distinguish Republicans from Democrats. Here are some of the very serious differences between them which you should keep in mind next November.

Democrats buy most of the books that have been banned somewhere. Republicans form censorship committees and read them as a group.

Republicans tend to keep their shades drawn, although there is seldom any reason why they should. Democrats ought to, but don't.

Republicans study the financial pages of the newspaper. Democrats put them in the bottom of the bird cage.

Republicans raise dahlias, Dalmatians, and eyebrows. Democrats raise Airedales, kids, and taxes.

Democrats eat the fish they catch. Republicans hang them on the wall.

Republican boys date Democratic girls. They plan to marry Republican girls, but feel they are entitled to have a little fun first.

Democrats make up plans and then do something else. Republicans follow the plans their grandfathers made.

Republican sleep in twin beds--some even in separate rooms. That is why there are more Democrats.

At any rate, whatever the challenges we face as educators, it is still our obligation to see that quality and equality of opportunity continue to characterize the school systems of this State in the future no less than in the past. So let me spend the next several minutes specifying ways in which a new high plane of educational excellence can be reached despite very real

difficulties.

We must, of course, demonstrate accountability for the funds we do receive and show that important educational objectives are actually being attained. This is one purpose of the Basic Competency Tests that are being administered for the first time this year. I consider this testing program one of the most significant developments now taking place in education in New York. It is especially needed to make the high school diploma more credible, at a time when a lot of people are saying all too many graduates have failed to learn even minimal skills in such areas as reading, speaking, writing, and computing. As just one example, U.S. News and World Report recently ran a cartoon showing a high school graduation at which the principal holds up a record and tells the parents: "And now, for graduates who can't read, a recorded diploma." Equally important, these tests will be extremely useful for detecting student weaknesses in time to correct them and thus help youngsters to grow in self-esteem knowing they have skills which are essential to lead productive lives in today's knowledge-based society.

It is worth pointing out here the experience of one of the first school systems in the nation to administer such a program. This was Denver, which originally gave the tests only to seniors in four areas, arithmetic, spelling, language, and reading. Between 10 and 15 percent of the kids failed to pass all four sections the first time. So the Colorado Legislature stepped in and directed the city to let students take the tests as early as the ninth grade in order to allow time for remedial work. In New York, of

course, we are beginning with ninth grade testing and should therefore achieve the desired result--which is the achievement of functioning competency--from the outset.

I also want to say something about the experimental tests being given this month in the additional areas of practical sciences and health, writing skills, and civics and citizenship. While the final decision to require these additional competencies for high school graduation, along with reading and mathematics, is deferred until the end of our experimental period, I would urge you to anticipate that decision and accord them parity of esteem with other subjects in your school programs. Not so parenthetically, I happen to believe the biggest curriculum change in the next decade will be in citizenship education, morals education, values education, law-related education, and yes, too, in education for global interdependence. Whichever term you prefer, they are all interrelated.

Something else that ties in with what I am saying is the review of so-called curriculum mandates now nearing completion.

By way of background, it was only a few years ago that the mandates were under attack from educators across the State as being too restrictive, holding back flexibility in the program and forcing kids into a lockstep pattern of movement through the schools. We therefore decided in 1975 to take a long hard look at all the requirements contained in the Education Law, Regents Rules and Commissioner's Regulations, in order to determine whether the curriculum mandates make as much sense today as they did when

they were enacted into law or promulgated through regulations. This review has been of great value to the Department for the reason that a wide variety of organizations concerned with the requirements have been involved in the study. More than 30 different groups, in fact, provided suggestions. My recommendations will be made to the Regents at the Board meeting in December.

One thing that struck me as especially interesting is that the recommendations made to the Department show strong support for maintaining most existing mandates or even adding requirements. (The two notable exceptions are in regard to physical education requirements and the mandates concerning the teaching of health.) No one seems to be saying any longer that the Regents Examinations ought to be abolished, which is quite a change. And most organizations representing teachers viewed the study of the mandates as an opportunity to include in the Commissioner's Regulations requirements providing that particular disciplines would be taught. Put another way, the mandates are now considered as a kind of bill of rights, or basic platform, aimed at making sure every youngster will obtain a balanced education at a time when budgets are being cut and programs are being pruned.

This leads me to another concern I have, namely, just what people have in mind when they jump onto the "back to the basics" bandwagon.

I'm all for kids getting a solid foundation in skills like reading, writing, and so forth. These are exactly the priority areas I have designated for the use of Title I funds, for example. Let me point out, too, that the

Regents emphasized the importance of reading in one of their Position Papers back in 1971, well before the back-to-the-basics movement caught on. I claim, and I am supported by recent national evidence reported in The New York Times a week or so ago, that we have never left the basics. But I am not altogether happy with what I see taking place in different parts of the country in the name of back to the basics, because some of it seems to be rooted in misguided nostalgia, as if pedagogical practices were all good in the past and all bad today. Anyone who thinks like this ought to read about the atrocious conditions that urban reformers like Jacob Riis and Joseph Mayer Rice witnessed in the schools a century ago. To quote just one account Rice gave of schooling in New York City:

> It is indeed incomprehensible that so many loving mothers whose greatest care appears to be the welfare of their children are willing, without hesitation, to resign the fate of their little ones to the tender mercies of ward politicians, who in many instances have no scruples in placing the children in class-rooms the atmosphere of which is not fit for human beings to breathe, and in charge of teachers who treat them with a degree of severity that borders on barbarism.

This may be overstating the case. But the fact remains that some people today are confusing the fundamentals of education with off-target peripheral concerns, such as the length of boys' hair and the length of girls' skirts, and are hell-bent, as someone recently said, on indoctrinating kids in blind super-patriotism and insulating them from any unsettling idea whatever.

Maybe some educators did go too far in wishing schools everywhere were like Summerhill, or something similarly unstructured. But this is no reason for education to careen to the opposite extreme, symbolized most glaringly by the book banners of Kanawha County, West Virginia, and, unfortunately, replicated here in New York recently.

This brings me to the final point I want to stress on this occasion.

New York State has the best system of education anywhere. This does not mean that it is not necessary to work at making it better and more efficient if we can and to meet additional needs. Surely, excellence has no ceiling. But we are leaders nationally and, indeed, in much of the world, because of the quality and diversity of the programs we offer to people of all ages, at all levels of development, and the cost is worth it. The ideals of our total educational enterprise, as I said in my inaugural address six years ago, are "the liberation of the human spirit, the release of human potential, and the enhancement of human dignity." This is high-risk idealism, of course. But I am convinced that we are doing a great deal to enlarge and improve the educational, professional, and cultural opportunities of our people consistent with the belief--which I am sure you share--that it is in our power to take the most furthest and the best highest. Our accomplishments, unfortunately, all too often get glossed over.

Now, however, we are at a critical point at which much that has been accomplished over the years could be undone. We need to work harder

than ever simpl to preserve hard-won gains of the past. We see in New York City the abrupt and cruel dismantling of a once proud system. Simultaneously, we must make tough decisions about what else is most worth doing in the future, recognizing that there won't be many dollars available with which to do it. The only advice I can give you is simply this: money must go first into buying more direct services for students. This is the top priority. And it is well ahead of whatever else is in second place.

Only time will tell just what can be done that has not been done before. But we ought at least to have our priorities sorted out and be prepared to put them into effect as soon as possible. Let me share with you just a few that are on my agenda.

The education of the handicapped remains one of my highest priorities. During the past year, we reorganized our service in this area by establishing an Office for the Education of Children with Handicapping Conditions and appointing an Assistant Commissioner charged with improving educational opportunities for this segment of our population. I also appointed the first Statewide Advisory Council made up of educators, parents, and other advocates of the handicapped, to advise the Department on needs for changes in regulations, legislation, and the development of a State plan in the field of education for the handicapped. New Commissioner's Regulations were adopted in May which provide that parents of handicapped children will be represented on

local committees of the handicapped and that each parent of a handicapped child has the right to be present at the time his or her youngster's case is to be reviewed. The new Regulations also set forth due process procedures whereby a parent of a handicapped child may take issue with the appropriateness of an individual placement within the educational system. The 1976 Legislature also made a significant change in the financing of education for children with handicapping conditions. And yet, I am not satisfied that we are over the hump in this important area. As the old American adage reminds us, if we had not already done so much we would not still have so much to do.

A lot more must be done, too, to provide full equality of opportunity to other groups which, let's be honest about it, also stand at the margins of what is supposed to be a universal system of education. I am thinking of the educationally disadvantaged, on the one hand, members of racial and ethnic minorities and the children of migrant workers, and, on the other, the gifted and talented.

And what about adults who never received an adequate education for one reason or another?

I also wonder what plans you are making for turning declining enrollments into opportunities to do things you were unable to do when the biggest problem you had was to accommodate ever-growing numbers of students from year to year. This could be the right time to bring about school district

consolidation, to create teacher self-renewal centers for the development of better teaching methods, to launch community education centers, to start or expand early childhood education programs, to promote dual-enrollment opportunities for students in nonpublic schools, to desegregate schools, and so on.

This does not exhaust all the possibilities, of course. But I think you can see from what I have said that there is no reason why education should stand still simply because we are unable to do some of the things we might otherwise have done.

In coming to a close, let me express the heartfelt hope that each of you will be led by high aspiration and compelling inspiration to turn present-day problems into long-term gains in the schools of your community. May it be said of you, as it was said of the climbers of Mount Everest who, eventually in their arduous ascent, disappeared into the clouds: "When last seen, they were still climbing."

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